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ABSTRACT

This case study looked at one preservice teacher during field experiences prior to her student teaching as she addressed the complexities of supporting the literacy learning of students in a class for students with learning disabilities and in a regular class setting. The preservice teachers' lessons emphasized multiple literacies. Data were collected through surveys, observation notes, dialogue journal entries, videotapes of lessons, and e-mail correspondence. Results demonstrate that the preservice teacher was a reflective practitioner with high expectations for her students' success and a high area of control regarding her capabilities as a teacher. The research also illuminates the low self-esteem and underdeveloped reading and writing abilities of the children in the class for students with learning disabilities. The research has implications for policies and practices in special education and teacher education programs. (Contains 62 references.) (SM)

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# One Preservice Teacher's Experiences Teaching Literacy to Regular and Special Education Students

**Janet C. Richards**
**Timothy E. Morse**

## Abstract

This case study looked at one preservice teacher during field experiences prior to her student teaching, as she addressed the complexities of supporting the literacy learning of students in a learning-disabled class and a regular class setting. The preservice teacher's lessons emphasized multiple literacies. Data were collected through surveys, observation notes, dialogue journal entries, videotapes of lessons, and e-mail correspondence. The inquiry demonstrated that the preservice teacher was a reflective practitioner with high expectations for her students' success and a high locus of control regarding her capabilities as a teacher. The research also illuminates the low self-esteem and underdeveloped reading and writing abilities of the students in the learning-disabled class. The research has implications for policies and practices in special education and teacher education programs.

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Considerable research has examined groups of preservice teachers in attempts to determine how field experiences prior to student teaching affect their professional development. Many of these studies employ presemester and postsemester interviews or large end-of-term data sweeps to capture preservice teachers' filtered reminiscences and recalled moments, rather than "documenting their life directly" (Jacob, 1992, p. 312). Little research has observed preservice teachers for an extended period. Therefore, "there are surprisingly few details about how individual preservice teachers learn to teach children to read in field settings" (Broaddus, 2000, p. 573).

This intrinsic case study takes an ethnological microanalysis stance (Erickson, 1992) to look closely at one preservice teacher, Alisha, as she participated in a semester-long, reading and language arts field program in the third year of her teacher education program. Intrinsic case studies, frequently represented in qualitative research, seek to discover what is common and unusual within a particular setting (Stake, 2000). Systematic ethnographic microanalysis offers a holistic perspective of what is studied and, in part, consists of observing individuals intensely as they act, react, and try to make sense of their work in educational contexts (Erickson; Florio-Ruane & McVee, 2001). As modes of exploration, these forms of research are time-consuming and labor intensive because they require many personal interactions between researchers and study participants (see Erickson; Silverman, 2000).

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Rationale | Context | Frameworks | Methodology | Major Themes | Limitations | Discussion | References

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## Rationale for the Inquiry

We employed an ethnographic approach in our inquiry in an attempt to provide a holistic view of Alisha's thinking, expectations, and teaching practices as she addressed the complexities of supporting the literacy learning of students in a learning-disabled special education class and in a regular class setting. (Note that the term *learning disabled* refers here to individuals with disorders of "one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written" [Lloyd, Forness, & Karvale, 1999, p. 1]). As researchers, we felt comfortable collaborating to study Alisha's teaching experiences, as one of us (Richards) is a professor of education and supervisor of the literacy field-based program, and the other (Morse) is an assistant professor of special education.

**Controversy Surrounding the Identification and Instruction of Special Education Students**

Many researchers believe that the current identification and assessment of students considered learning disabled should be revised to align existing research with practice (Lyon et al., 2001). For instance, even though nearly 80 percent of students referred for possible placement in special education in the United States receive their referral because they have difficulty learning to read (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Lloyd, 1999), data indicate there is little difference between these students and those in regular class settings who experience reading problems (Lyon et al.). Specifically, few distinctions are observed between students in regular education programs who read below the 25th percentile on standardized tests but are not classified as learning disabled, and students who receive special education services. Further, there are many students with significant reading difficulties who are not formally identified and served in any program beyond what is provided in their regular education classroom.

Given these circumstances, Lyon et al. (2001) estimate that the number of students recognized as poor readers and accommodated through special education or compensatory programs might be reduced by up to 20 percent through early identification and prevention programs. They note, "The key is to enhance classroom instruction accompanied by targeted intervention programs for children who require more help" (p. 281). This approach might result in the actual identification of a specific learning disability being reserved for students whose reading or other academic problems do not adequately respond to a variety of interventions presented to them in a regular classroom.

**Implications for Preservice Teachers**

The controversy surrounding the identification and instruction of students with specific learning disabilities has implications for undergraduate university students pursuing degrees in elementary education. As part of their course work, future elementary teachers must learn how to offer effective reading lessons for all their students. They also must learn how to modify or enhance instruction so that students who are experiencing reading difficulties will achieve success. In addition, they must understand how to identify students whose reading problems warrant a special education referral. Because most students who are referred are placed in special education settings and remain in those settings throughout their school careers, it is important that they are accurately identified (Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank, Smith, & Leal, 2002).

**Other Issues Sparking Our Interest for the Inquiry**

Considerable research has studied the effects of teachers' expectations on students' learning (Cotten & Wikelund, 1997). Data from the well-known Pygmalion study (Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968) and other analogous research (e.g., Brattesani, Weinstein, & Marshall, 1984; Brophy & Evertson, 1976; Cohn & Kornelly, 1970; Cotten, 1989; Feldman & Theiss, 1982; Findley & Good, 1982; Hillman, 1984; Marshall & Weinstein, 1985; Sebeson, 1970) suggest that teachers' expectations and perceptions regarding their students' academic abilities can have a reciprocal impact on students' performance and achievement.

As a student focusing on elementary education, Alisha's program of study, as stipulated by requirements in the state of Mississippi where she was attending university, included one special education course that offers a broad overview of the field. Although Alisha had some qualified knowledge related to teaching students classified as learning disabled, we assumed that as a neophyte teacher she had no preconceived notions about their abilities or limitations. Therefore, we were interested in whether Alisha held different or similar expectations for her two groups of students' behavior and learning and if her expectations would affect her pedagogy.

Finally, we wanted to ascertain how students assessed as learning disabled would respond to a literature-based instructional program that incorporates multiple literacies (the extension of literacy beyond reading and writing to encompass all forms of communication, including computer technology, music, dance, and the visual and performing arts), offers integrated lessons that place students at the center of instruction, situates phonemic awareness and phonics activities only within authentic reading events, and connects the literacies of print and the visual and communicative arts. Through our inquiry, we hoped to contribute information to the body of literature relevant to special education and preservice teacher development. Ultimately, we hoped to examine and improve our own practices.

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## The Context for the Inquiry

The inquiry was carried out in a small school serving children from kindergarten to Grade 3 (aged approximately 5 to 9 years) on the Mississippi Gulf Coast of the United States. Many classes at the school are structured to accommodate multiage interactions. Teachers of regular education students promote student inquiry and, for the most part, offer holistic instruction. Students are encouraged to collaborate, voice their opinions, and discover answers to their questions through research initiatives. Dimensions of the regular education curriculum include a reading-writing connection, theme teaching, emphasis on the visual and performing arts, and portfolio assessment.

Students in the two special education classes receive more traditional instruction, including explicit instruction in phonics for 1 hour, 5 days per week. The phonics program used is *Sing, Spell, Read, and Write* (Dickson, 1999-2000), designed in part to help students hear and discriminate among sounds, associate phonemes (sounds) with graphemes (alphabet letters), and give the correct sound to letter combinations presented in print. For example, during one lesson, Miss Smith (a pseudonym), one of the special education teachers, instructed students to "show me the letter that tells you to say /e/ [short e sound]" and "tell me the beginning sound in the words *in, animal, umpire,* and *octopus.*"

After observing multiple literacy lessons taught by preservice teachers, Miss Smith asked if a preservice teacher might work with her students the next semester. Miss Smith wanted to expand her literacy instruction to include multiple forms of communication, and she believed that her students might increase their reading and writing proficiencies if they were provided opportunities to learn through the visual and communicative arts. Responding to Miss Smith's request, and keeping in mind that elementary education students must learn how to individualize instruction and identify children for possible special education referral, we asked our new group of preservice teachers if anyone wanted to volunteer to work in Miss Smith's room. Although the literature is limited regarding preservice teachers working in special education settings at the elementary level, we believed that such experiences had the potential to broaden sensitivities and awareness regarding children who might need special intervention to improve their reading abilities.

**Alisha**

Alisha volunteered to teach three second-grade special education students in Miss Smith's class and four third-grade regular education students. When we asked her if she would participate in a semester-long research project that would target her thinking in conjunction with her teaching, she agreed.

Alisha had no previous teaching experiences. She was a nontraditional university student: a single parent in her midtwenties. Her grades and achievement were high, and we would describe her as cheerful, compassionate, amiable, calm, composed, positive, reflective, and gentle.

**The Field Program**

The field program has existed for 9 years. Although always student centered and literature based, during the past 2 years the program's philosophy and concurrent pedagogy have evolved in response to new ideas about multiple literacies (see Flood, Heath, & Lapp, 1997, and Richards & McKenna, in press, for comprehensive descriptions of multiple literacies).

The preservice teachers report to the elementary school two mornings per week for 2.5 hours each day. On Mondays, guided by the program supervisor, the preservice teachers teach two concurrent 75-minute lessons to two small groups of students (the same groups throughout the semester). On Wednesdays, the preservice teachers observe the program supervisor's demonstration lessons, participate in lectures and seminar discussions, and attend presentations by some of the master teachers at the school on topics such as portfolio assessment, themed teaching, and creative bookmaking.

The preservice teachers link print-based activities with the visual and communicative arts. They also help the elementary students critically examine commercials and other popular media messages. In addition, following Vygotsky's (1986) "zone of proximal development," the preservice teachers collaborate with their students in presenting student-authored puppet shows, Readers Theatre presentations, and drama enactments. They work side by side with their students, scaffolding, modeling, and creating text-based murals, dances, books, and songs. In addition, with the preservice teachers' help, students interpret data on computer websites and CD-ROM software, and visually represent facts and concepts by creating graphs and murals.

Instructional sessions typically include preservice teachers and their students writing in journals; reading; talking and writing about books; planning, authoring, and editing stories and informational text; participating in literacy learning games devised by the preservice teachers; and engaging in reading comprehension and writing strategies.

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## Conceptual Frameworks for the Inquiry

Two frameworks informed our inquiry:

1. Tenets of sociocultural constructivist learning theory, which situates individuals within a social context, posits that individuals construct knowledge in transaction with their environment, and suggests that language reveals individual's knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs (Alvermann, 2000; 2001; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Richardson, 1997)
2. Premises from social interactionism theory, which points out that as human beings encounter problems that emerge through their circumstances, they move to resolve those problems through thoughtful reflection and action (Woods, 1992)

We also were mindful of traditions from hermeneutics that "indicate that the same text can be read [and interpreted] in a number of ways" (Tappan & Brown, 1992, p. 186). In addition, strongly influenced by feminist perspectives and cautions regarding the transactional nature of ethnographic research, we acknowledged the challenges and limitations of describing others' behavior and representing others' points of view and realities mediated through our own experiences and perceptions (Behar, 1993; Florio-Ruane & McVee, 2001).

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## Research Methodology

### Questions Guiding the Research

In our inquiry we sought to answer the following questions:

1. What themes might be visible in the data that will provide a window into Alisha's thinking, beliefs, and expectations regarding teaching students in a learning-disabled special education class and students in a regular education class?
2. What teaching behaviors will Alisha exhibit with the two groups of students?
3. In what ways might Alisha adjust her plans for lessons or alter her instruction to meet the needs of the two groups of students?
4. Will Alisha's initial thinking and expectations regarding the two groups of students change over the course of the semester?
5. How will Alisha's students respond to lessons that involve multiple literacies?

### The Study

We collected data each week throughout the semester through researcher-devised surveys, dialogue journal entries, observation field notes, and videotapes of Alisha's lessons. We met weekly to discuss our understandings of the data. Alisha's responses to the survey questions together with the videotapes of her lessons were the most valuable data sources. We used Alisha's dialogue journal entries and our field notes to triangulate the data, a means of reducing ambiguity and the likelihood of misinterpretation, and "a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning" (Stake, 2000, p. 443).

### Analyzing the Survey Responses and Videotapes of the Lessons

We considered many approaches for analyzing the 24 transcribed pages of Alisha's survey responses and the videotapes. Extracting the encompassing themes as they appeared chronologically throughout the data seemed most straightforward and appropriate for considering the overriding research questions. Thus, the nature and goals of our inquiry determined how we examined the transcripts and videotapes.

Following guidelines of content analysis, we conducted "a careful line-by-line reading of the text [s]" (Ryan & Bernard, 2000, p. 780). We read and reread the data, looking for distinct categories of meaning. As patterns became evident, we noted what we considered to be salient information (Gay, 1997). We resolved differences in our opinions regarding the data categories through discussion until we reached consensus.

Next, we categorized and labeled the themed topics that appeared across the two data sets (survey responses and videotapes of Alisha's teaching), cross-checking our impressions and understandings with Alisha's dialogue journal entries and validating our impressions through

conversations with her (Bogdan & Biklin, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Erickson, 1992; Janesick, 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

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## Major Themes Emerging From the Inquiry

Four major intertwined themes that highlight Alisha's attributes as a teacher emerged from our analysis:

1. *Alisha's affective dimensions:* high expectations for her students' success, a positive outlook, a high internal locus of control (personal beliefs about one's abilities to affect the environment; see Rotter, 1966), a reflective nature

2. *Alisha's concerns:* for her students' well-being, about the classroom setting in which the students in the learning-disabled class worked, for her students' future learning

3. *Alisha's insightfulness:* cognizant of her initial anxieties about teaching, recognizing that lessons for students in the learning-disabled class needed to be structured differently than for students in the regular class setting, aware that both groups of students were occasionally difficult to teach, recognizing her students' interests in multiple literacy lessons, understanding the importance of celebrating her students' successes, aware of the need to enhance the low self-esteem of the students in the learning-disabled class, perceiving her students' apprehensions about failure

4. *Alisha's beliefs:* that additional phonics instruction and more of "the basics" might help her students' reading and writing development, that students in the learning-disabled class were appropriately placed, that students in the learning-disabled class were capable, that she could be successful teaching both groups of students

### Placing the Themes in a Meaningful Context

The following narrative (with Alisha's exact words, pauses, silences, and shifts in speech; see Richardson, 2000; Tedlock, 2000) places the four intertwined themes in a fuller, more meaningful context.

Initially, Alisha was anxious about teaching students with learning disabilities, but she quickly overcame her apprehensions:

> I was nervous and scared. I didn't know. I felt.... This is exactly how I felt. I felt like I didn't even know yet how to teach students who have, who are, so they say "normal," or whatever, and I was.... I didn't know if I would hurt them. I didn't want to hurt them.... I didn't know how severe their disabilities would be. I didn't know if they had behavior problems and I didn't think I could handle that. But once I was in there I realized that I could.

She also had high expectations for both groups of students:

> I'm going to be equally successful with them. I just have to do things a bit differently with the learning disabled group.... They [students in both groups] can both think...they both have wonderful thinking abilities. Actually, the students in the learning-disabled class all seem to understand. They do really well. The students in the

> learning-disabled class actually paid attention more and understood the [lesson about] parts of a story better than the third graders.

She recognized that the students in the learning-disabled class were apprehensive about their academic abilities and the possibility of receiving poor grades:

> They're frightened.... They're so afraid of making mistakes...they don't want to take the risk. They think I'm going to grade them, or they think they'll be wrong.... Like we had a dialogue journal...and I just asked them, "Could you please tell me about yourself and what you like to do?" And I read it to them. And I explained it to them. And then I asked them to write something, and they just sat there. And I was like, "Well, let me help you." And, I went around the room and the first little boy could talk and he can write, but he's afraid he's going to be wrong. That's what it is...and they still don't understand that it's OK for them to write something and not be perfect. And then I asked them to write something, and they, they just sat there...and the first little boy could talk and talk, and he told me everything that he wanted me to know. And I said, "Let's write it." And he said, "I can't." And I said, "Justin, yes, you can. I know you can do it." And he's, he can write, but he's just like I said--afraid it's going to be wrong.

Alisha was concerned about the classroom setting in which the students with disabilities worked:

> The special education room is a split room. They have to share it with gifted enrichment students. Students go in and out all day long.... That's not the best environment.

As the semester progressed, Alisha remained positive about her special education students' behavior:

> They're very attentive.... Oh, I've had some problems with the third grade [regular education students], and none whatsoever with the second grade [special education students]....They're wonderful.

She continued to have high expectations for her special education students' success, and she did not consider them less capable or different because of their disabilities:

> So I'm not going to go in there saying, "Oh, well, they're disabled," you know. These kids can do it. They just do it differently. The main difference [between the two groups] is grade level. I think of the second graders as the little kids and the third graders as the big kids.

In addition, she came to recognize that the students in the learning-disabled class were more successful when she offered shorter lesson segments within the 75-minute teaching period in conjunction with direct teacher assistance:

> I try to mix it up a little more with them.... I don't expect them to sit still and do one thing for a long period of time. I use the same concepts and the same ideas [with both groups of students]. While we're doing a [multiple literacy] project [with the students in the learning-disabled class] I still try to link it [to print-based literacy] by asking them questions about the story that we read or asking them questions about things that we have gone over...to let them have some freedom to do something else at the same time. I use the same concepts and ideas [with both groups]...the third graders are more independent. I can just give them a prediction log and they read it themselves and they answer it, or they predict. Whereas, the second graders, I have to

take their dictation, but they still make a prediction.

Throughout the semester, Alisha exhibited a high internal locus of control regarding her abilities to assist both groups of students ("I think I'm helping the children") and she reflected considerably about her teaching ("I always reflect and I always pick apart more than anybody, I think...the things I can do better and improve.")

Alisha recognized that the students in the learning-disabled class had received daily phonics instruction for 2 years, yet she had a strong hunch that additional phonics instruction might help her students:

> They've been taught that [phonics]. They've no idea what to write.... I know they've been taught that and they try to sound things out...but they don't know where to start except for very small, small words, like *fat*.... No one can read it [what the students write]...it's just letters, it's B, C, F. But their spaces are grouped like [they are writing] words. I think they have a lot of work to do with phonics.... I think they've missed something...they could do more if they had more of the basics.

Alisha recognized that both groups of students were occasionally difficult to teach:

> The second graders are more difficult to teach because I feel I have to present the concepts a little bit more to them. Does that make sense? A little bit...I have to go over things more and I have to reinforce it more. Sometimes I feel worn out [with the third graders] because they seem to have a lot more of...they've developed, developed more of, a--I don't want to say personality. They've just developed more of an attitude of how they're going to treat people, and they're always talking and they always have something to say, and they have trouble raising their hands...that's the honest answer.

She also recognized that all of her students were interested in multiple literacy lessons:

> They're really interested in the lessons.... I'm going to do my drama presentation with the second graders because they just seemed really interested in it when I mentioned it and they want to do it. They're already picking out what parts they want, and they don't argue over it, so I'm just letting them do it. I did murals with both groups. I felt they would have fun doing the mural and they learned more about the story.

Alisha agreed that the students in the learning-disabled class were appropriately placed, and she worried about their future learning opportunities:

> Oh, my goodness. I think they're appropriately placed. I think...I can't say what's appropriate, though. I don't have any experience to judge that. I know that some of them are a lot...are way behind other second graders, and I feel that, that they need extra help in those areas. But...if they're placed in special ed, are they going to get forgotten and they're not going to be able to--are they just, are people going to disregard them and think they're never going to learn? I mean, I really don't know how special education for them works...their teacher made the comment that one of my students wasn't on the diploma track and I'm, I was thinking, "He's in the second grade. How do you know if he's on the diploma track?" I mean, maybe I shouldn't have said that....

She celebrated small academic successes of the students in the learning-disabled class ("I didn't know that he could write the date because he just copied last time. But he wrote it all by himself"), and she recognized that she needed to enhance the self-esteem of the students in the class because they sought approval and confirmation of their academic work:

> Well, I tell them every time I go in that they've done a good job. I give them stickers every day. They get treats every time I go in. They get a lot of external rewards, but it's intrinsic too because I feel they want to make me say those things to them. They want me to approve of what they're doing. They just hunger for it. They just [say], "Look at this, look at this. Is it good?" And I'm like, "Yes, it's good. It's beautiful."

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## Limitations of the Inquiry

As with all research efforts, the limitations of this inquiry must be addressed. First, case studies are concerned with particulars in a given situation. They usually do not allow researchers to make broad generalizations or build scientific theory (Stake, 2000). This intrinsic case study was confined to examining one preservice teacher in a specific teaching context, and her voice provides all of the data. Therefore, generalizations to other preservice teachers and teaching circumstances are not possible. "Each case has important atypical features, happenings, relationships, and situations" (Stake, p. 435).

Second, "ethnography is open to critique" (Florio-Ruane & McVee, 2001, p. 158). "Conscientious ethnographers have...long been aware that in naturalistic settings, the interaction of researchers and subjects can change behaviors in ways that would not have occurred in the absence of such interaction" (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000, p. 676). In fact, "postmodern critique calls attention to the researcher's presence" (Alvermann, 2000, p. 134). Our ongoing observations and the focus of our survey questions may have influenced Alisha's thinking and instructional behaviors.

Third, scholars acknowledge the difficulty of separating the researcher from the researched (Alvermann, 2000). The possibility of observer bias "looms large in the thinking of both sociologists and anthropologists in the ethnographic tradition" (Werner & Schoeple, 1987, p. 259). Others may draw conclusions that differ from ours (see Tappan & Brown, 1992, for a discussion of hermeneutics).

Fourth, the program supervisor interacted often with Alisha and offered advice and suggestions regarding her lessons. These interactions likely influenced Alisha's decisions and pedagogy.

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## Discussion and Implications

Despite the limitations associated with case studies and ethnographic research methods, this inquiry contributes considerable insight into the thinking, expectations, and teaching practices of one preservice teacher as she supported the literacy learning of students in special and regular education. The study also provides substantial information about three students in a special education setting. In addition, the research supports the value of collecting and analyzing narrative data. Further, the inquiry substantiates the efficacy of field experiences for preservice teachers and provides information useful for informing special education programs and preservice teacher professional development.

Two explicit and separate threads are woven throughout the data that merit discussion. These dichotomous components are Alisha's positive expectations regarding the three students in her learning-disabled class and their contrasting perceptions and attitudes.

Alisha's responses to the survey questions and a perusal of the videotapes of her lessons offer a comprehensive portrait of her commendable attributes pertinent to teaching. Although anxious before her first teaching session, Alisha quickly assumed a positive stance. She held high expectations throughout the semester for her students' success, and she displayed a high internal locus of control regarding her abilities to teach. Alisha also was concerned for her students' well-being, and she celebrated her students' small successes. She was a thoughtful practitioner.

In addition, she was an advocate for her students. Further, Alisha structured her teaching practices to help ensure that her students achieved success. Alisha recognized her students' interests in multiple literacy lessons, yet she also believed that additional instruction in phonics might help her students' reading and writing. Alisha firmly believed in her students' capabilities and minimized their disabilities. Finally, she continually enhanced her students' self-esteem.

Although the inquiry provides positive information about Alisha's thinking, expectations, and teaching practices, it also offers some poignant details about the perceptions and literacy abilities of the three students in the learning-disabled class. Although only in second grade, the students were apprehensive about their academic abilities and the possibility of receiving poor grades. They believed they could not write, and their reading and writing abllities were minimal. They also exhibited low self-esteem and craved approval. On a more positive note, Alisha saw an improvement in her students' writing abilities. In addition, the students actively engaged in multiple literacy lessons.

The finding that Alisha's robust expectations for the success of the students in the learning-disabled class and her strong internal locus of control concerning her abilities to enhance their academic performance appeared to have minimally affected her students' self-esteem is not surprising. Alisha worked with her students for only 75 minutes per week for one semester. Her students most likely responded on the basis of their previous school experiences. Studies indicate that students are very aware of teachers' differential treatment (Cooper & Good, 1983; Good, 1987; Rist, 1987). Indirect messages about students' capabilities can affect their self-esteem and "younger children are more susceptible to expectancy effects than are older students" (Cotten & Wikelund, 1997, p. 9). Certainly, these three young students were aware of their special education classification and placement (see Haring et al., 1992). In addition, the reciprocal link between teachers' expectations regarding their students' academic potential and students' "expectations, self-esteem, and learning have been well established in the literature" (Cambourne, 2001, p. 785). Evidence indicates that "the majority of failed readers have low expectations of themselves as readers and writers [and]...that the origins of these low expectations can be traced back to classroom experiences that labeled them as failures or potential failures" (Cambourne, p. 785).

The finding that both groups of students responded positively to broadened conceptions of literacy also is not unexpected. Students who participate in classrooms were multiple literacies are emphasized have heightened opportunities to become more motivated, actively engaged learners (Richards & McKenna, in press). Students can tap into their multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993), receive individualized instruction, collaborate in learning activities, and use alternative forms of communication, all of which promote their success and motivation for learning (Richards & McKenna; Smagorinsky, 2000, online document).

Certainly, that the students in the learning-disabled class had difficulties reading and writing despite daily phonics instruction is intriguing, given the current emphasis on phonics in the United States and the recommendation for consistent, direct phonics instruction for students with learning disabilities (Special Education for Students with Disabilities, Executive Summary, 1996, online PDF document). We intend to conduct further research on this topic in an attempt to determine how and what type of phonics instruction benefits students with learning disabilities. For example, while some experts endorse the benefits of systematic phonics lessons (e.g., Adams, 1990; Ehri et al., 2001, online document; Lyon, 1997), others argue against teaching phonics as a distinct subject (Allington & Woodside-Jiron, 1998; Cambourne, 2001; Coles, 2000; Goodman, 1998; Mathes &

Torgesen, 2000; Strauss, 2001).

The implications of our conclusions relate directly to special education policies and practices. The discovery that the three students in Alisha's learning-disabled class had ongoing problems with reading and writing and persistent feelings of low self-esteem raises additional questions for study. Is current special education practice "the most efficient and effective way to educate students with special needs"? (Executive Summary, Center for the Future of Children, 1996, p. 1; see also Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002; Saint-Laurent et al., 1998; Vaughn, Moody, & Schumm, 1998). Since the 1997 U.S. federal *Individuals With Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) mandates placing students with learning disabilities in the least restrictive environment, special education personnel might consider teaching most students with mild to moderate disabilities in regular education classes. Placement in regular education settings would allow students with disabilities to think and work collaboratively with nondisabled peers, thereby bolstering their self-esteem. Implementation of this type of class environment mandates smaller class sizes, major changes in classroom instruction, support by inclusion specialists, and individualized help from expert teachers.

The research also speaks to development of preservice teachers. Elementary education students usually do not have opportunities to work directly in special education settings. Yet, as classroom teachers, they must accept responsibility for identifying and referring children for possible special education placement. In addition, during their careers, they will teach many students who have problems learning to read and write, but who do not qualify for special education placement. Further, if they are in the United States, in keeping with the *Individuals With Disabilities Education Act*, they will likely work with students who are classified as having special needs, but who receive instruction in regular, inclusive educational settings.

Clearly, teacher preparation programs must routinely provide opportunities for preservice teachers to work with students in special education settings. Interacting closely with students with special needs can make future teachers aware of and more thoughtful about their expectations for all students'potential for academic success. Working with students in special education classes along with a university supervisor also provides opportunities for preservice teachers to recognize how to adjust and tailor their lessons to meet students' individual learning differences. Toward that end, we plan to extend our field program's activities to include time for all those in our elementary education classes to work with students in special education classrooms. In addition, we plan to invite special education teachers and professors to share their experiences and expertise during our seminar discussions. Such interactions can provide our students with up-to-date information regarding the identification, assessment, and teaching of children who require additional support and skilled instruction to optimize their academic progress.

Finally, we plan to share the results of this research with the prospective preservice teachers in our program. Alisha's attributes and her experiences teaching a small group of students in a learning-disabled class offer considerable insights for future teachers who will probably teach many students who require specialized interventions and gentle, compassionate nurturing to attain their full capabilities.

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